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‘Support your country and buy Chinese brands’ – Would Chinese consumers buy it?

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Abstract

This study explores the impact of advertising messages that contain national identity content on Chinese consumers’ purchase intention and actual purchase. A scenario-based experiment ($n = 357$) and an open-ended qualitative survey ($n = 26$) illustrated that Chinese consumers’ *brand attitude* and *purchase intentions* are positively influenced by national identity. Nevertheless, the findings suggest that such an advertising strategy is not sufficient for increasing actual product sales when employed on its own. The impact of these advertisements on *actual purchase* is affected and moderated by utilitarian and hedonic values.

Key words: National identity, Advertising, Chinese domestic brands, Purchase intention, Actual purchase

‘The pride of the nation; the pride of the world.’

- Advertisement of CECT mobile China (2015)

Introduction

China’s (People’s Republic of China, PRC) smartphone production industry has grown significantly in the past two decades. During 2015, over 1.6 billion mobile phones were made in China, accounting for over 60 per cent of global production (Custer, 2015). Instead of supplying electronic components to large multinational companies, Chinese producers have started launching their own smartphone brands. Existing Western consumer research (e.g., Knight, 1999; Huddy and Khatib, 2007) suggests that stimulating an individual’s sense of national identity could arouse feelings of belonging to the nation, enhancing their devotion to domestic brands (Huddy and Khatib, 2007) and increasing consumers’ domestic brands buying intention and actual purchase (e.g., Dmitrovic et al., 2009). National identity is a socially constructed identification that represents the self-view of the nation and binds people within a community together (e.g., Bulmer and Buchanan-Oliver, 2010). National identity goes beyond shared culture, but includes the feeling of belonging; it is based on the belief that members of a nation share commonalities (Grimson, 2010; Hogan, 2005).

Therefore, to promote and encourage the purchase of domestic brands by Chinese consumers, some Chinese mobile phone companies have in recent years started following the trend, emphasising the importance of *national identity* in their advertising messages. Slogans such as ‘Support your country, let the world love China, and use products made *by* China’ are utilised to arouse Chinese consumers’ sense of national identity and feeling of belonging in order to increase sales.

Nevertheless, recent Chinese consumer research indirectly indicated this might not be as straightforward. Ding (2017) indicated that as the Chinese economy has experienced more than three decades of dramatical growth and increased openness to foreign products, consumer xenocentrism is significantly prevalent in China. Chinese consumers are orientated or predisposed towards foreign goods regardless of their price and quality levels compared to local goods which provide the same utilitarian values (Balabanis and Diamantopoulos, 2016; Mueller et al., 2016; Ding, 2017). Consumer culture studies (e.g., Russell et al., 2010) also proposed that Chinese consumers are convinced that using foreign brand products can enhance their personal image. Furthermore, a consumer's purchase of a brand may depend on the country-of-origin effects (CoO), in terms of whether the brand is from a well-developed or a developing country (Hamin, 2006). The stereotype of low quality and rampant piracy of 'made in China' products could undermine Chinese consumers' confidence in domestic brands (e.g., Frank et al., 2012).

In other words, the positive relationships between emphasising national identity and consumer brand attitude, purchase intention and actual purchase suggested in Western consumer markets (e.g., Knight, 1999; Huddy and Khatib, 2007) may not be assumed for the Chinese context. Unfortunately, research in the effectiveness of national identity messages used as a communication strategy to enhance Chinese customers' brand attitude, purchase intention and actual purchase of domestic brands is still scant. This study seeks to explore and examine the impact of advertising messages that convey the value of national identity in China, a developing and large frontier market, and to suggest practical implications for practitioners. A scenario-based experiment was employed to explore the influence and effectiveness of national identity-focused advertising messages on Chinese consumers' smartphone purchase intentions and actual purchase. A follow-up study provided context-

based data to demonstrate how Chinese customers perceive and evaluate national identity messages in advertisements.

Advertising and National identity

It has been a long research trend and existing studies (e.g., Becerra and Korgaonkar, 2010) have demonstrated that consumers' perceptions towards an advertisement significantly affect their perceived attitude towards the advertised brand, which positively influences behavioural intentions and significantly increases actual buying. Consumers use brands as symbolic resources to define and build their own identity. Consumers may achieve feelings of belonging to a social group, as brands unite consumers within communities (Elliott and Wattanasuwan, 1998). This feeling of belonging can be represented as being part of a national community.

Drawing on social identity theory, national identity is a collective identity that binds a nation's members together (Zeugner-Roth et al., 2015). National identity serves individuals by giving them a sense of belonging and security; consumer ethnocentrism, patriotism and national pride are affective components of national identity (Nielsen, 1996). Existing research suggests that stimulating an individual's sense of national identity could arouse feelings of belonging to the nation, enhancing their devotion to domestic brands (Huddy and Khatib, 2007). National identity has been found to be relevant in explaining brand identity and contemporary consumer behaviour than the previously studied concept of shared culture (Bulmer and Buchanan-Oliver, 2010). Advertisements with national identity content are directly concerned with civic values (Lubecka, 2013), and can significantly increase consumers' buying intention and encourage their actual purchase (e.g., Salehzadeh and Pool, 2017).

National identity and Chinese consumers

China, as a modernising nation yearning for national power status, earlier research indicated that it is capitalising on national identity; Chinese consumers are influenced by the national wealth and power (Barme, 1999), and the existence of ethnocentrism has made Chinese consumers to feel proud of the nation, and support the country (Zhou and Belk, 2004). Therefore, national identity should have a strong impact on Chinese consumers' brand attitude and actual domestic brand purchase when their feeling of belonging to the nation and sense of national identity are awoken.

Nonetheless, as highlighted previously, Chinese consumer studies in recent years demonstrated that this may not be the case. Chuang and Yen (2007) firstly proposed that especially in developing countries, customers tend to buy foreign products; this implies the concept of consumer xenocentrism, which represents consumers' belief that domestic products are inferior, and consumers' favouritism towards foreign products. Xenocentrism is the preference for the products, styles, or ideas of someone else's culture rather than of one's own. Consumer xenocentrism has been found significantly affecting Chinese consumers' attitude and purchase towards domestic brands and products (e.g., Balabanis and Diamantopoulos, 2016). Chinese consumers are orientated or predisposed towards foreign goods regardless of their price and quality levels comparing to local goods which provide similar or the same values (Balabanis and Diamantopoulos, 2016). Cultural values and contemporary social-political forces interplay within consumers' formation and change of attitudes towards the choice of domestic and foreign products. Favourable consumer foreign bias is found with both mundane and widely available products, expensive and inexpensive products (Ding, 2017). Zhou and Hui (2003) demonstrated that symbolic benefits (such as modernity, prestige, and associations with foreign lifestyles) constitute one of the primary motivating forces of Chinese consumers' purchases of products of nonlocal origin, including products that may not be commonly regarded as conspicuous. Chinese consumers are

convinced that using foreign brand products can enhance their personal image (e.g., Russell et al., 2010).

Furthermore, a consumer's purchase of a brand may depend on the country-of-origin effects (CoO) (aka made-in image and the nationality bias), in terms of whether the brand is from a well-developed or a developing country (Hamin, 2006). Nebenzahl et al. (1997) defined CoO effects as the image of countries that influence consumers' perceptions of a country and of its products. Hamzaoui and Merunka (2006) indicated that goods made in China are associated with cheap labour and products. The stereotype of poor-quality and rampant piracy of 'made in China' products could undermine consumers' confidence in 'made by China' brands (e.g., Frank et al., 2012). Wong, et al. (2008) indicated that Chinese consumers' buying behaviour of this generation has shifted; Chinese consumers are low in ethnocentrism, and are more likely to be affected by CoO and more willing to buy foreign brands.

Thus, although existing (non-Chinese consumer) studies suggested that adopting national identity messages in advertisements used as a communication strategy could enhance a customer's devotion to domestic brands, and increase the consumer's buying intention and purchase (e.g., Dmitrovic et al., 2009), this influence on Chinese customers is expected to be low and limited. In this study, we assume:

H1: Advertising messages that emphasise the importance of national identity *are not able to* improve Chinese consumers' *attitude* towards Chinese domestic brands.

H2: Advertising messages that emphasise the importance of national identity *are not able to* increase Chinese consumers' *intention* to purchase the products made by Chinese domestic brands.

H3: Advertising messages that emphasise the importance of national identity *are not able to* increase Chinese consumers' *actual purchase* of the products made by Chinese domestic brands.

Method

An (one factor, between-group designed) online scenario-based experiment was used to test the effect of emphasising national identity in advertising messages on consumers' attitudes towards Chinese domestic smartphone brands and on their purchase intentions. Their actual purchases were traced and recorded by questionnaire system.

Scenarios and manipulation checks

The scenarios were designed by referring to existing Chinese smartphone advertisement messages. In the control group (S1), the scenario description introduced a domestic Chinese mobile phone company that has recently released a new smartphone which fits participants' needs (acceptable price and hardware, etc.), with the same price and specifications as similar products of other domestic and foreign brands. We followed Liu and Keng (2014) in designing experimental messages that do not mention actual details of the mobile device (e.g., screen and battery size) or a specific brand name to avoid personal preference bias. In the treatment group (S2), the advertisement message introduced a domestic Chinese company and showed national identity messages. A third scenario (S3) was designed as a comparison group, presenting a popular foreign brand.

One hundred and twenty (120) Chinese consumers aged over 19 were recruited via Weibo (a popular Chinese social media platform) and joined the pre-study for manipulation checks. Participants were randomly assigned to one of the three scenarios and were asked to answer the consumer national identity questions on seven-point scales, adapted from Keillor

and Hult (1999), after reading the advertisement messages. A one-way ANOVA with Bonferroni post-hoc test [$F(2, 117) = 4.62, p < .01$] showed that manipulation was successful: the domestic brand with national identity content advertising messages (S2) had the significantly highest score on the consumer national identity measure compared to the other two groups [$M_{S2} = 5.01, SD_{S2} = .82; M_{S1} = 4.22, SD_{S1} = .90; M_{S3} = 3.94, SD_{S3} = .87$].

Measures

Five items were adopted from Spears and Singh (2004) to measure consumer attitude towards the brand on seven-point scales. Another five items on seven-point scales (Spears and Singh, 2004) were used to measure consumer purchase intention.

To capture the actual purchase, the questionnaire system automatically recorded the brand, model and operating system (e.g., iOS/Android) of the mobile device used by the participant in the study. Participants were not informed that this information was being recorded until they submitted their responses. Their consent to use this information for academic purposes was requested afterwards. A number of control variables were included in the questionnaire. Five items on seven-point scales adapted from Zaichkowsky (1994) were used to measure consumer involvement with the advertising. Frequency of smartphone use and consumers' willingness to switch mobile phone brands were measured using two one-item questions on seven-point scales. All the scale items were translated from English to Mandarin Chinese, back and forth, by two bilinguals to ensure accuracy of expression.

Procedure

After reading the participant information sheet and ethical terms of the study, participants were randomly assigned to one of the three scenarios. They were asked to read the scenarios and then answer questions about their attitude towards the advertised brand and

their intention to purchase the advertised product. On the next page, *participants in the treatment group (S2) were asked to recall and state whether they had seen similar Chinese domestic smartphone advertisements that contain national identity-related messages when evaluating and deciding on the purchase of their latest mobile device.* Before their responses were submitted, all participants answered the questions on involvement with advertising, frequency of smartphone use and demographics.

Results

357 smartphone users *who claimed they had bought a new smartphone within the last six months* were recruited via Weibo. The demographics of the participants in the sample (53% female and 47% male, all aged over 19, 54% aged between 19 and 35, 58% had a college/university degree) were consistent with the population of smartphone users in China (Statista, 2017). All participants were asked to take the survey *on their smartphone*. The system recorded the model of their smartphone; all mobile devices used by participants were released within the previous 10 months, confirming that they were new smartphone models and therefore new purchases. Consistent with the average distribution of income in China (National Bureau of Statistics of the People's Republic of China, 2016), 64% of participants earned CNY 3,000–7,000 per month. Participants lived in cities across the Chinese mainland. There were no systematic relationships among the randomly assigned groups by demographic variables [Gender: $\chi^2 (2, N = 357) = 1.30, p = .52$; Age: $\chi^2 (8, N = 357) = 7.61, p = .47$; Education level: $\chi^2 (4, N = 357) = 6.02, p = .20$; Work experience: $\chi^2 (10, N = 357) = 8.35, p = .59$; Income: $\chi^2 (12, N = 357) = 17.93, p = .12$].

Hypothesis testing

Principal component analysis (PCA) extracted only one component for brand attitude [eigenvalue 3.29; 71% of the variance, with all loadings over .80], suggesting the five brand attitude items measured a consistent and single construct. In line with other research using the scale (e.g., Spears and Singh, 2004), five brand attitude items were combined to make a single composite score [Cronbach's alpha = .87].

Brand attitude

A one-way ANCOVA (consumers' involvement with advertising [Cronbach's alpha = .87], the frequency of smartphone use, and mobile phone brand switching willingness controlled as covariates) [$F(2, 351) = 19.14, p < .01$] with Bonferroni post-hoc test showed that, compared to the control group that did not contain national identity messages (S1), participants in the scenario that provided national identity messages (S2) had a significantly more positive attitude towards the advertised Chinese domestic brand [$M_{S2} = 5.63, SD_{S2} = .93$ vs. $M_{S1} = 5.28, SD_{S1} = .82$]. The findings provided evidence that advertisements emphasising the importance of national identity *actually significantly* enhanced Chinese customers' attitude towards domestic brands. Therefore, H1 was *not* supported.

Insert Table 2 about here

Purchase intention

PCA extracted only one component [eigenvalue 3.38; 68% of the variance, with all loadings over .80], suggesting the consistency of the one construct measured by the five purchase intention items. Following Spears and Singh's (2004), the five purchase intention items were combined to make a single composite score [Cronbach's alpha = .89].

A one-way ANCOVA (consumers' involvement with advertising, the frequency of smartphone use, and mobile phone brand switching willingness controlled as covariates) [$F(2, 351) = 19.11, p < .01$] with Bonferroni post-hoc test demonstrated that national identity messages in mobile phone advertisements significantly increase Chinese consumers' *intentions* to buy domestic brands [$M_{S2} = 5.22, SD_{S2} = .99$ vs. $M_{S1} = 4.61, SD_{S1} = .95$]. Thus, H2 was *not* supported.

 Insert Table 3 about here

It is notable that group S1 (Chinese domestic brand with no national identity message) scored higher than group S3 (a popular foreign brand) [$M_{S1} = 5.28, SD_{S1} = .82$ vs. $M_{S3} = 4.88, SD_{S3} = .97, t(236) = 2.89, p < .01$] in the measure of brand attitude. This revealed that, overall, Chinese consumers do have a positive *attitude* towards their country's domestic brands even without no national identity messages, although no subsequent purchase intention difference [$M_{S1} = 4.61, SD_{S1} = .95$ vs. $M_{S3} = 4.47, SD_{S3} = 1.06, t(236) = 1.09, p = .61$] was found between S1 and S3.

Furthermore, no brand attitude and purchase intention difference was found between all the demographic variables (including age, gender, education level, income, and living area/city) [$p > .05$], showing that for Chinese smartphone consumers, the arousal of national support and the positive attitude towards supporting Chinese are less likely to be affected by individual differences in general.

Actual purchase

To test H3, mobile brands used by participants were assessed. Brands such as Apple, Samsung and Sony were grouped as foreign brands, while brands such as Coolpad, Xiaomi and OPPO were grouped as Chinese domestic brands. A Chi-square test that compared the system-recorded participants' smartphone brands was conducted *on those participants in the second scenario (S2)* who reported that they *had seen* similar national identity messages when purchasing their latest smartphone and those who *had not*. The results showed no significant difference [$\chi^2 (1, N = 119) = .29, p = .59$] (see Table 1). In other words, when the participants were evaluating the purchase of their new mobile device, no matter they had seen national identity content ad messages or not, the proportions of the actual purchase of a domestic brand and a foreign brand exist no significant difference. This implies that while national identity messages can positively improve Chinese consumers' attitude towards domestic brands and encourage their intention to purchase a device from a domestic smartphone maker, in an actual buying decision, the effectiveness of the national identity messages is limited. Therefore, H3 *was* supported. Again, no significance was found between all demographic variables [Gender: $\chi^2 (1, N = 119) = 0.34, p = .85$; Age: $\chi^2 (4, N = 119) = 1.66, p = .79$; Education level: $\chi^2 (2, N = 119) = 0.66, p = .72$; Work experience: $\chi^2 (5, N = 119) = 9.56, p = .10$; Income: $\chi^2 (6, N = 119) = 7.19, p = .30$].

 Insert Table 1 about here

Follow-up study: *Chinese consumers' evaluations of national identity-focused advertisements*

The results of the between-group designed experiment revealed that although consumer xenocentrism and CoO effects was proposed and found prevalent in China, when

receiving national identity ad messages, Chinese consumers showed a significantly higher *willingness to support* domestic brands. However, the actual mobile purchase data showed that their attitude towards the domestic brand and purchase intentions may not directly transform into actual purchases. This implies that the effect of national identity on actual purchase might be moderated by other factors. To further explore this, an online, self-administered open-ended questionnaire was employed to further understand whether and how Chinese consumers consider national identity advertising messages. This follow-up study also identifies the underlying factors which cause consumers to have eventually purchased foreign brands over domestic brands. The use of an open-ended questionnaire can supplement the main experimental studies by a relatively structured probing procedure to understand the underlying reasons for the experiment results (Singer and Couper, 2017).

Procedure

Twenty-six Chinese participants, who reported buying a new smartphone within the past 6 months and seeing national identity content advertising messages (example ad messages were provided), were recruited and joined the survey questionnaire via Weibo. The data were collected until no novel information could be obtained from additional participants, i.e. data saturation (Guest et al., 2006; Francis et al., 2010). There were 14 females and 12 males in the sample, all aged over 19, of whom 15 were aged between 19 and 35. Sixty-one per cent of the participants earned CNY 3,000–6,000 monthly. Participants lived in cities across the Chinese mainland. Matching user names with IDs ensured that no one had previously participated in the scenario-based experiment. The system recorded that, on average, participants spent 15 minutes and 9 seconds (SD = 256 seconds) answering the questionnaire (a variation of 11 minutes and 51 seconds to 21 minutes and 57 seconds).

After informed consent procedures, all participants read the scenario S2 (a Chinese brand accompanied with national identity messages). Participants were then asked to recall similar national identity messages used in Chinese smartphone advertisements they had seen before. They were then asked questions on their perception towards this type of message, its impact on their opinion and attitude towards Chinese brands, and their purchase intentions. Next, participants were questioned about their latest smartphone purchase and whether they considered national identity (e.g., supporting Chinese brands). Finally, they were asked to describe any reasons/factors that play an important role in their final purchase. In the last session (optional), participants were asked for suggestions for making national identity-related advertising messages more influential. All the questions were open-ended and presented in Mandarin Chinese. Participants' responses were translated from Mandarin Chinese into English, back and forth, coded and interpreted by two bilinguals to ensure accuracy of expression.

Findings

The influence of national identity advertising messages

Twenty-seven per cent (7 of the 26) of the participants reported that national identity-related advertising messages have very little or no influence on their *attitude* towards domestic brands and will not affect their purchase decision:

'This kind of message (national identity) could influence me a bit, but I have to say, to me, this influence is very weak.' – **P12**

'This kind (national identity) of message has no effect on me' – **P5**

Most participants (19 of the 26) indicated that their attitude towards domestic brands would be positively affected by advertising messages that emphasise national identity. After reading these messages, they feel proud of their country and indicate that they are more willing to support the development of domestic brands:

'When I see the (national identity) ad, I feel proud of China and I do hope Chinese brands can be recognised by the world ... when choosing to buy a new mobile, I would consider domestic Chinese brand products.' – **P4**

In terms of purchase decisions, most of these participants (16 out of 19) indicated that other factors significantly affect their choices. Participants indirectly indicated the CoO effect: the stereotype and experience of *inferior quality* and *post-sales services* are key negative influences on decisions to buy Chinese brands. Thirteen participants emphasised that although they would want to *support* Chinese brands, they still have serious concerns about product quality and post-sales service:

'Although I do love my country, and I want to support China, and try Chinese brands, I have major concerns about the product quality ... I wouldn't want to buy an expensive mobile and then be forced to buy another one in a few months just because of the poor quality and unacceptable post-sales service.' – **P11**

'I would love to support Chinese brands, but purchasing one (Chinese brand smartphone) really needs careful consideration. Based on my experience, the product quality of Chinese brands is ok ... not that bad I would say, but the problem is there is nearly no post-sales service ... and some of the functions are copied from other brands; when using it, you can really feel it is just not as good as international brand products.' – **P3**

Eleven participants indicated that a *lower price* is an important reason for their decision to buy a Chinese smartphone, but some participants also pointed out that the price difference between Chinese and foreign brands is decreasing. This affects their purchase decisions and could lead to them buying a foreign brand:

'Price is an important consideration to me. I'd very much like to support Chinese brands, but honestly, the lower price is the reason that made me decide to spend money on buying one.' – **P7**

'The factories are all in China, so there's no reason the price should not be lower than foreign brands. However, based on my observations, many domestic brands have increased their product prices; their products are not cheaper than foreign brands nowadays ... after the comparisons, I bought an iPhone.' – **P6**

Brand image and influence of social group also hinder the influence of national identity-focused advertisements. Although not the majority of participants indicated this, but the concept indirectly supported that some Chinese consumers could be affected by consumer xenocentrism bias. Four participants indicated that they feel unimportant if they use a Chinese-brand smartphone. Foreign brands are associated with high class and affluence, and also help consumers relate to their social group:

'Although reading this (national identity) message can make me want to try a Chinese-made mobile, I have to admit that I am highly affected by brand images. For example, using a new iPhone gives the impression of having a good job and a high income. It also gives the impression of having good taste ... therefore, when I see other people using a foreign brand, I want to buy one to make other people perceive me as being like these other foreign brand users ...' – **P1**

'People around me are using foreign-brand smartphones. If I don't buy one, I feel small when hanging out with them.' – **P25**

Interestingly, four participants mentioned that they purchase Chinese-brand smartphones because they want to be viewed as someone who supports his/her country. This shows that self-image has a determinant role in Chinese consumers' decision to purchase Chinese or foreign brands:

'I bought my OPPO smartphone because I don't want to be seen as someone who does not support and love his country.' – **P20**

Suggestions to make national identity-focused advertisements more effective

Nine participants emphasised that mobile phone product advertisements are influential to them. They suggested that national identity-focused advertisements could be strengthened by providing information on product quality improvements:

'I can see that many Chinese brands are spending money on innovation rather than copying other foreign brands' techniques in recent years; if they indicated these innovations in the ads with national identity messages, I would be persuaded to give the Chinese brand a try.'
– **P11**

'It works for me if the national identity ad gives international recognition information. It could be like "Supporting China – Chinese quality is now international quality" (and list the certifications received from international organisations, etc.).' – **P26**

'I bought a Xiaomi smartphone because I think this Chinese brand has been recognised by people from other countries. These companies could use national identity messages and also introduce more information about how the Chinese brand has become internationally

recognised ... supporting these brands can support the country, and I will not have to endure a low-quality experience.’ – **P6**

Three participants suggested that although national identity messages can arouse their feeling of belonging and make them willing to buy domestic brands, this depends on the product category:

‘I can easily be affected by national identity and patriotic factors, but when I need to spend money, I have different levels of support for different types of product. For example, I strictly buy Chinese-brand living accessories to support my country, but when I need to spend a large amount of money on something like a car, foreign brands become a consideration.’ – **P17**

Discussions and implications

To summarise, although most of the recent Chinese consumer studies proposed and suggested that Chinese consumers are more likely and tend to buy foreign brands and the level of patriotic nationalism is weakening, the present study demonstrated that across common demographics (age, gender, education level, work experience and income), supporting the country is still a spirit that significantly affects Chinese customers’ attitude towards domestic brands. Therefore, Chinese-brand advertisers can utilise national identity messages as an advertising strategy to enhance consumer attitudes towards their brand. By providing a feeling of belonging and representing national identity values, such messages have potential for deployment on social media platforms as a marketing tactic in China.

Nevertheless, the results also suggested that such a strategy is insufficient for increasing product sales when employed on its own. The actual purchase, while possibly influenced by national identity, is determined by utilitarian (product/post-sales service quality

and price) and hedonic (brand image and social group identity) values perceived by Chinese consumers. Consumer xenocentrism bias could exist when it comes to the final purchase decision. Arousing a sense of national identity is only influential when the choice of a Chinese brand can maximise the overall purchase utility. Lower price is found to be one key reason why Chinese consumers buy domestic brands. A challenge that Chinese producers face is finding an appropriate pricing strategy while trying to enhance product quality and establish brand image. Other factors such as confidence in the brand, which is a subjective certainty (Laroche et al., 1996), play important roles in Chinese consumers' decisions to buy domestic brands. In practice, it is crucial to improve product quality and communicate that improvement to consumers. For example, international quality standard certifications are a way to enhance consumer trust in a brand. Furthermore, for Chinese brands to be considered, national identity advertising should be accompanied by messages that illustrate achievement of a desirable image for consumers. Advertisers can shift the focus by illustrating a desired social image and acceptance for consumers who represent a sense of national identity through their purchase. Meanwhile, Chinese brands should also work on building a unique image, while encouraging consumers to use the products in building their self-image. For instance, domestic producers might consider promoting their brands as being of high quality, affordable and including integrated functions such as WeChat. Consumers will not only show themselves as proud of being a Chinese, but will also present an image of being smart and stylish.

The present study contributes to the advertising literature by showing a gap between consumers' attitudes towards a brand, their purchase intentions, and their actual purchases in the Chinese market. Advertising messages may arouse in consumers a certain sense of national identity and belonging to the nation, but how these emotions can be transformed into actual purchases needs further investigation. This research also has methodological

implications for conducting marketing and advertising research; both self-reported data and automatically recorded/tracked data can be used to provide a more comprehensive understanding of consumers' actual purchase decisions.

Limitations and suggestions for future studies

As suggested by some participants, Chinese consumers may consider national identity differently when choosing different products. Further research should test the role of national identity-focused advertisements for other product categories. In addition, the present study asked participants to recall their previous (latest) smartphone buying experience and match their latest purchases (mobile phone model) with their recalled experiences. Even though this recall approach has been adopted widely in experiment design (e.g., Teasdale and Fogarty, 1979), future studies could consider using other methods to examine consumers' actual purchasing decisions. Furthermore, although the scenario-based experimental method has many advantages and is considered appropriate for examining the cause and effect by controlling other extraneous variables (Howitt and Cramer, 2014), the artificiality of the setting may not reflect real life. Future studies are encouraged to adopt other methodologies such as surveys and utilise analytical approaches such as Structural Equation Modelling to analyse structural relationships where appropriate. Studies investigating the moderation effects of the utilitarian and hedonic factors/variables on the effectiveness of national identity messages may also provide useful and interesting insights. Finally, although it has provided interesting and useful insights, the open-ended questionnaire employed in the follow-up study has only been designed to address the gap between Chinese consumers' purchase intention and their actual purchase of domestic brands after exposure to national identity messages. Future research can also consider utilising in-depth interviews or focus groups in an attempt to probe extensive, flexible and interactive questions on the topic (Arsel, 2017).

China's mobile phone market is expected to continue growing as the country's economy develops. Companies in this sector have invested heavily in advertising their products. It is worth mentioning that the findings revealed that slightly more Chinese consumers are using and buying Chinese domestic brand smart mobile, compared to the use of foreign brands. This shows that the domestic brands could break the consumer xenocentrism bias and CoO, but more supporting measures are needed. Chinese brands should utilise their national identity privilege to outperform foreign brands. However, in-depth exploration of how Chinese consumers consider domestic brands and how Chinese smartphone brands can increase their market share through effective advertising messages is still scant. It is hoped that this study of Chinese national identity-focused mobile phone advertisements will attract further attention from researchers and practitioners alike.

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Figure 1. Theoretical framework

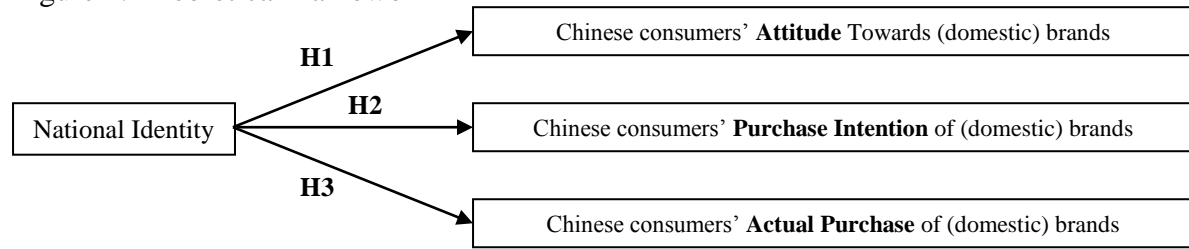


Table 1. Results of the Experiment

(Chinese consumers who have bought a new smartphone within the last 6 months)					
(Self-reported) Attitude and Intention	A Chinese domestic brand				A popular foreign brand (S3, n = 130)
	With national identity messages (S2, n = 119)		Without national identity messages (S1, n = 108)		
	Attitude towards the brand: M = 5.63, SD = .93, SE Mean = .087		Attitude towards the brand: M = 5.28, SD = .82, SE Mean = .092		Attitude towards the brand: M = 4.88, SD = .97, SE Mean = .084
	Purchase intention: M = 5.22, SD = .99, SE Mean = .093		Purchase intention: M = 4.61, SD = .95, SE Mean = .097		Purchase intention: M = 4.47, SD = 1.06, SE Mean = .089
	Attitude towards the brand: $F(2, 351) = 19.14, p < .01$; S1 vs. S2 [$p < .01$]; S1 vs. S3 [$p < .01$] Purchase intention: $F(2, 351) = 19.11, p < .01$; S1 vs. S2 [$p < .01$]; S1 vs. S3 [$p = .61$]				
(System automatically recorded) Latest (within six- month) Purchase	<i>Had seen</i> similar national identity messages when buying their latest smartphone		<i>Had not seen</i> similar national identity messages when buying their latest smartphone		
	Bought a domestic brand smartphone	Bought a foreign brand smartphone	Bought a domestic brand smartphone	Bought a foreign brand smartphone	
	n = 39	n = 35	n = 26	n = 19	
$[\chi^2(1, N = 119) = .29, p = .59]$					

Appendix. Experiment Scenarios

Imagine that you need to buy a new smartphone to replace your old one, and a smartphone advertisement (which is published by Company A) draws your attention.

Scenario 1 (S1): This advertisement shows information about a new smartphone model that Company A has just released. Based on your evaluation, it seems that the price, the appearance, and the product specifications such as the size of the display, the size of the battery and the camera all fit your needs. In addition, based on your knowledge, the information also shows that the price and the product specifications of this newly released smartphone closely match (e.g., not cheaper and not more expensive) similar product lines of other smartphone brands. The advertisement introduces Company A as a domestic Chinese brand that has been making smartphones with its own brand/label for several years. It aims to develop new and innovative smartphone products.

Scenario 2 (S2): This advertisement shows information about a new smartphone model that Company A has just released. Based on your evaluation, it seems that the price, the appearance, and the product specifications such as the size of the display, the size of the battery and the camera all fit your needs. In addition, based on your knowledge, the information also shows that the price and the product specifications of this newly released smartphone closely match (e.g., not cheaper and not more expansive) similar product lines of other smartphone brands. The advertisement introduces Company A as a domestic Chinese brand that has been making smartphones with its own brand/label for several years. It aims to develop new and innovative smartphone products. Furthermore, the advertisement also states and highlights the following messages: ‘The pride of the nation; the pride of the world’ ‘Support your country and give domestic Chinese brands a try - give us a chance to impress you’

Scenario 3 (S3): This advertisement shows information about a new smartphone model that Company A has just released. Based on your evaluation, it seems that the price, the appearance, and the product specifications such as the size of the display, the size of the battery and the camera all fit your needs. In addition, based on your knowledge, the information also shows that the price and the product specifications of this newly released smartphone closely match (e.g., not cheaper and not more expansive) similar product lines of other smartphone brands. The advertisement introduces Company A as a popular foreign brand that has been making smartphones with its own brand/label for several years. It aims to develop new and innovative smartphone products.
